

## [Retired Irish Shed Owner]

c. 3 Vt. 1 19834

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### RETIRED IRISH SHED OWNER

The gray of the arid chasm abe flaunted the hillside through which the dusty road wound its narrow course to the summit. Here and there stolid patches of green stood in silent resplendent charm reflecting the tints of a late afternoon sun. The glandular figure of Old Jim Reilly was presented in full relief against the eastern sky which overlooked the ragged network of mountains extending from Quarry Hill. The jagged ledges of the cragged defile unfolded a vista of life before the reminiscent eye of Old Jim. A life of men against granite, where men thrilled to its perils and hazards, laughed,fought, drank, and loved with its money, where men gored the lifeless slabs with their blood, with their lives....

The rugged sincere old Irishman had witnessed, had worked, had lived, the sequential stages of a stone from the time it was quarried till the time it lay in the shed,cut, polished, and carved, ready for the cemetery. For Jim, the one remaining stage was not far distant.

The words from his deep-throated voice came thick through his Irish brogue and distributed the intense stillness of the air emanating from the cessation of the constant rumble of compressors.

"I worked every part of it. I bet that I know more granite than any one man in the whole of Washington County. When I first began I worked for the Wetmore and Morse Granite 2

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Quarries. We worked the lower end of the quarry and there were some beautiful sheets of granite there. My job was to examine them for any defects. I remember one day that we hauled this beautiful stone out of the quarry. I looked at it once and I told the old super that it had some iron in it. Well, the old super says, 'Jim, if you say so there must be. But we better let it stay out overnight and make sure.' It rained that night and sure enough there were iron rusts all over the stone so we just threw it out. Of course you had to have exceptional good eyes. I don't think that I could do it now.

"My next job was drilling. I handled the dynamite and the powder. I could tell just the way the stone was going to break by the rift in it. I don't care what kind of a stone it is, it's just like a stick of wood, it will always follow the rift. One day the old super told me to break this certain stone. I could see that it was bad business and didn't want to do it. Of course I didn't want to tell him so I told him that I didn't have enough powder. 'Well,' says he, 'give it to me.' And break it he did. Say, that charge ripped his face into bloody streaks and god-awful holes and his arms and legs were ripped and almost torn off. Let me tell you that poor devil was dam lucky to live.

"But I had the narrowest escape that any one ever did have. We were breaking stone one day and I had dug a three foot hole to put the powder in. Well, I tamped it extra 3 hard that day because I wanted to get a good break. Then I lighted the fuse and we all ran back into the woods to wait for the charge. We waited for about ten minutes and it didn't go off. The super says to me, 'Jim, it must have been a miss but don't take any chances right away.' So I waited till I thought that everything was safe. Then I went down into the hold and I sat right on the stone and began to dig for the powder. Well, that powder blew up and the stone went right out from in under me out sideways. Yes, sir, there I was. Flush on the stone. I don't think that a stone would have blown like that again in a hundred years.

"That same week Mike Mahoney was so badly hurt when he was caught in a charge that he was never able to work again. Mike Kilfer took his place the next day and before the

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week was out he was blown dead when a drill struck his neck and blew his head plumb off his shoulders. We were picking up parts of him a year later. Such a bloody mess....

"After that I went to Colorado to work. Real nice place. Top of the Rocky Mountains. I did the dynamiting out there for a Scotch and Irish concern. When I worked there we quarried the stone to build the Denver State Capitol with. I got good pay and the fellows were good to work for but I didn't have any education so I figured that I would be better off if I came back.

"When I came back, I served my time in the shed working for Ryle and McCormick. I learned cutting, carving, 4 drapery work, letter carving, polishing, and a lot of things that a young fellow of today would take years to learn. I guess that the hardest piece of work that I did was the piece called The Holy City in Ruins. It was a job which represented the Holy City in ruins and clouds of dust. I forget just how long I worked on it but there were times when I thought that I would have to quit. And just then they raised my wages. Then winter began to set in and I was frozen half of the time. My back ached like a tooth from the continual bending and I got rheumatism in my shoulder. They raised my wages again. I worked another month on it and I got damn good and sick of it and was ready to give up. My eyes were tired. My whole body was tired. So they raised my wages again. I finished it finally. They say that I'm the only man who got his wages raised three times on the same job. Oh my, oh my, when I think of it! That was the worst dang thing I ever did!

"Then I thought that I would go into business for myself. I built a little shed. It was the smallest shed in Montpelier and it had the biggest income. A few years of this and rheumatism began to set in pretty bad and I was a long time in bed. Thought it would be best to get rid of it so I sold all the equipment to different sheds. I'd still be at it if I could. It never bothered me too much and I enjoyed it very much. This rheumatism is the only thing that I got and everybody has to get something when 5 they get my age.

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"Yap, I married when I was young. Glad of it. Maybe I would have turned out wild. Most of my friends were heavy drinkers but I manages to drink without being a glutton although you wouldn't think so from this pod. Now most of those fellows are dead or ready to die. I raised a pretty fair family. Four girls and one boy. They're all away from home and married except one girl.

"Well, I'll tell you about the strike of '21. Boutwell and Corry got together and they gave notice to the quarry workers that they were going to work under new conditions beginning the following April. This was along in the fall. Well, along about the middle of January they thought that they would give the workers a long rest. So they laid them off. These poor dogs couldn't find any work so they loafed all that time. Come April and the quarries were going to open up again and no men. Frank Corry had about \$75,000 tied up in work to get out and Boutwell was all loaded up too. The only men that they could get were a few old fellows who weren't much good anyhow. So they got watch-makers, shoe-makers, tailors, bakers, all up from New York. The first three or four months that they were working there they did more damage than they did good. And they knew it and everyone else knew it. Frank Corry lost upwards to \$250,000 and I guess that he would have gone on the rocks if he did not own the best stock in the world right up there on the hill. And then they got these 6 French strikebreakers in from Canada. After that Corry and Boutwell refused to recognize the Union and they struck to it too because they have never had anything to do with it after that.

"I think that Boutwell, Corry, and the Rock of Ages were the three great evils of the granite business. The Rock of Ages have tried to get a monopoly on sheds and quarries so that they will be able to rule their prices and employ a certain set of men. Naturally a lot of good men are gradually losing their jobs. Old Corry tried to get a corner on all the light granite. He bought up about every light granite quarry in the state. Boutwell did the same thing with all the dark granite. Of course they weren't satisfied to get a decent price for their stock. The prices went up so high that it was foolish for anyone to buy Barre granite. To make

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the picture complete, a few fellows went out west and opened up a business and soon they were taking the business away from Barre. And they're doing the same thing down in Georgia right now. It's too bad. But you can't blame the people for paying less. And the stone is almost as good.

“Granite isn't what it use to be. Greedy and narrow men ate the core right out of it. But there's still something left if you know how to go about it. I guess I'd always say that anyhow.... Granite is in my blood.”